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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

EXDIS

DATE: September 15, 1969
Department of State
11:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: Tunisian Security

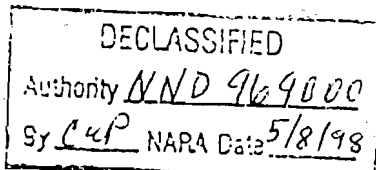
PARTICIPANTS: H.E. Habib Bourguiba, Jr., Tunisian Secretary of
State for Foreign Affairs
Mr. Hamed Ammar, Tunisian Minister

The Secretary
Mr. David D. Newsom, Assistant Secretary of State
for African Affairs
Mr. John F. Root, Country Director for Northern
African Affairs

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The Foreign Minister and the Secretary spent an hour today discussing Tunisia's security concerns. Starting off with a review of the Libyan coup, Bourguiba, Jr., said Tunisia was of course against coups in principle as they usually presaged a period, not of stability, but of instability. The Libyan coup as Tunisia analyzed it seemed to be the work of amateurs who must have acted with little advance preparation, for it is impossible to keep a secret for long in the Arab world. They were reacting out of frustration to an unsatisfactory internal situation in Libya, which was probably bound to bring a drastic change sooner or later. The problem is that they seem to represent a mixed bag of elements and probably will not know what to do next. There will be plenty of outsiders--Bathists, Nasserists, Soviets--eager to influence them. Tunisia agreed that there were some hopeful signs and Tunisia, like us, would do its best to get close to the new regime and to exert a constructive influence on it. But odds for success were not high. The Libyan elite from which the young military officers have come has generally been educated in Egypt or by Egyptians. They lack political maturity. It is significant that they have used phrases familiar in the Middle East context but have said not a word about the Maghreb. It is significant that the only Arab diplomat to be received at RCC headquarters on the first day of the coup was the Iraqi Chargé.

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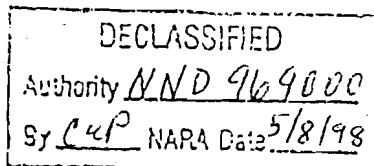
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In any event, while trying to make the best of the situation, Tunisia also had to think of the worst. Tunisia was a small morsel sandwiched between two radically inclined and unpredictable countries. Libya was susceptible to foreign influences and had the means for troublemaking. Radical Algeria had a government increasingly unsure of the support of its people. The very existence of Tunisia as a successful moderate country on close terms with the West is, from their point of view, an unwelcome example. "The race to take possession of the Libyan revolution is on," said Bourguiba. The Algerians, the Egyptians and the Bathists all have their various games to play in Libya, and behind them looms a still larger problem, the Soviet Union. It is instructive to remember, said the Foreign Minister, that "Libya was invented in 1951 to prevent a Soviet trusteeship." How could the Libyan Government today ever renew the lease for Wheelus Air Base?

The Tunisian Government, he continued, knows that it is responsible for its popularity at home and for internal security. By what it does it must earn and keep the confidence of the Tunisian people. It is in the matter of external security that it needs help, for here it feels insecure and this anxiety is shared by the people. In many respects they still lack sophistication and cling to old ways and old ideas. They must see tangible evidence that government policies are succeeding. The public outburst at the time of the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 was a revelation to Tunisia's leaders, showing there are deep wells of emotion that can be stirred up in a crisis. By the same token the Tunisian Government has come recently to realize that Ben Salah's program for putting the country under cooperatives was moving too rapidly for public tolerance. Hence the recent reform and cut-back of the cooperative movement and the Cabinet shakeup.

The Tunisian people and Tunisia's military cadres must likewise see evidence--tangible evidence--that cooperation with the West is producing military security. Tunisia's officers are not like Libya's, but they too are feeling frustrated, and the government is increasingly worried about them. They have received modern military training in France and elsewhere in the West but see that they lack adequate modern military equipment ("There is not even enough training ammunition!") and that the Tunisian army is still worth nothing militarily. In addition to receiving modern military equipment, they must also feel they have a constructive role in the peacetime life of the nation, and this the Tunisian Government hopes to provide. Finally, Tunisia knows that real security comes primarily through economic and social progress. In acquiring military equipment, therefore, there is the financial aspect to consider. Tunisia cannot afford to add to its budgetary burdens if this means neglecting essential economic programs.

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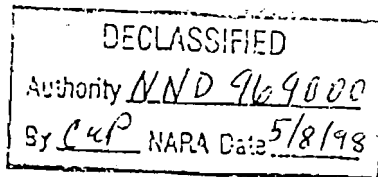
With this background, Bourguiba, Jr., said he wanted to speak now with utter frankness; perhaps we would even detect a certain bitterness, which was real. Over the past ten years Tunisia has developed a growing feeling that the United States is pursuing a kind of disengagement around the world. Perhaps this is because the US feels safe with its advanced military weapons and technology and also with the hot line to Moscow. But this does not mean that the Soviets have stopped expanding their sphere of action or that the dangers for a little country like Tunisia have stopped growing.

On the contrary, Tunisia more than ever feels the need for additional security. Tunisia is not unreasonable in its expectations. It knows about US Congressional attitudes and the difficulties of formal security commitments. But the conclusions of the Clowes report need updating in light of Tunisia's increasingly precarious position in its part of the world, and Tunisia needs more, and more modern, military equipment. Tunisia is by no means addressing itself to the United States alone in this matter. The Tunisian Minister of Defense, M'Zali, has been invited to visit French Defense Minister Debre in mid-October. The Italians are helping with a radar capability in northern Tunisia (the Foreign Minister noted at this point that the US might assist in extending radar coverage to the rest of the country, as radar would have a commercial as well as a military utility). The Tunisians had even detected an increasing Spanish interest in their welfare, and Bourguiba, Jr., thought he might stop in Madrid on his way home from his present trip.

What he had to ask of us now was to reconsider the Clowes conclusions and our present MAP program in the hope that our assistance could be augmented to serve Tunisia's needs more effectively. If we could not help, we should at least tell the Tunisians so.

The Secretary said he appreciated the frankness with which the Foreign Minister had set forth Tunisia's concerns. We ourselves were very much concerned by what had happened in Libya. There was no advance notice of the coup, it unfolded as an internal matter, there was no sign of effective opposition, and there was thus no basis whatsoever on which we could act. Consequently we did not want to react adversely to the coup, particularly as no one can foretell just what its outcome will be. We have come to realize from this and other experiences that the US is not really in a good position to cope with this kind of situation and that our best recourse is to maintain a low posture until we can see more clearly how to adapt to the new situation (Bourguiba, Jr., nodded his agreement with this reasoning).

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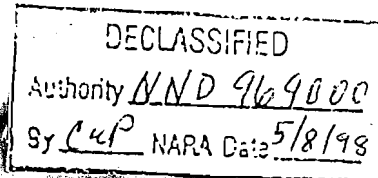
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The Secretary went on to say that there has been a great deal of misunderstanding about disengagement. Disengagement is a misleading term. All we are talking about is that there is a limit to what we can do to sustain foreign governments in power, particularly those which are unpopular with their own people--not, of course, the case with Tunisia.

We are simply reviewing our commitments and responsibilities throughout the world to make sure they are commensurate with our capabilities. By the same token we want to make sure that the assistance we give is effectively utilized. It is understandable that the American taxpayer finds it difficult to understand why we spend great sums of money to help shore up a foreign government in the name of stability, perhaps only to have that government overthrown and its country more unstable than ever. In some parts of the world we have been put under pressures almost akin to blackmail. Now what we are trying to do is introduce more realism and efficacy into our programs of foreign assistance. This is the background for some of our recent Asian policy statements, which have attempted to put the responsibilities and capabilities of our nation and those we are trying to help into more realistic perspective. (The Secretary said he of course did not have Tunisia in mind in referring to the weaknesses of our aid programs which we are trying to correct elsewhere. Bourguiba, Jr., regretted that Tunisia sometimes had to pay the price for those failings of other US beneficiaries which so irritate the US Congress.)

The Secretary said, having given this background, he wanted it to be clear that we were not backing away from our global responsibilities or our interest in the welfare of our friends. In Tunisia's particular case there was a strong feeling of friendship on our part--and we wanted to help where we could. A security commitment, as the Foreign Minister already recognized, was hardly a realistic possibility. It was unlikely Congress would ratify such a commitment. But we do want to show our support for Tunisia in other ways: first, by reaffirming our support; second, by moving from words to deeds that will help relieve the anxiety the Foreign Minister described; third, by reviewing our MAP assistance and doing what we can to help in this area. (The Secretary asked at this point whether there was one particular concrete thing more than any other that we could do now to be helpful. Bourguiba, Jr., disclaimed competence in the military field but after reflecting for a second cited the radar possibility.) The Secretary said he understood that Assistant Secretary Newsom and his colleagues would be going into the Tunisian MAP question in further detail.





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The Secretary concluded the conversation by saying that he hoped to see the Foreign Minister in New York and that we were also hoping, if the schedules could be worked out, to arrange an appointment for the Foreign Minister with the President.

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